DUST AND BLOOD

by MATTHEW GORDON MACNEIL

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Chapter 1

Two crows rested on the old pole, their wings silver with age, dark eyes studying him as he sat underneath a tree close by smoking a cigar.

Mid summer always brought them to the south, large hordes could be seen flying through the skies some days, scooping up meat off of carcasses they found lying along the road sides, and Gods knows there's plenty of them.

Some of the farmers shot at them when they touched their corn or went into their silos, but it seemed to do little to thin their numbers and, if anything, made them enemies for life.

Crows, like men, held grudges and never forgave slights done to them or one of their friends.

He watched the two birds with mild interest, eyes occasionally glancing down to look across the hills, taking in the broken trees and sandy dirt, an arid hellscape not many willingly traversed.

Two hundred years had past since the Great War between Athabaska and Lurgan, the two countries almost completely wiping each other off the map with bombs and military might. The world wasn't a nice place before, but in the aftermath of their conflict, it got a lot more hostile for all races.

For some, like the Dwarves, it made little difference as they could go deeper underground and so they did, several Dwarven settlements and Kingdoms existing in the mountains and underground.

Others though fared worse. The Halflings, cheerful people

who lived in small huts in the woodlands before the war, turned into murderous bandits once their beloved forests burnt to cinders. Now they roamed the countryside of Athabaska in nomadic bands, killing and robbing whoever crossed their path.

Humans survived in small communities, the major cities all having been reduced to rubble and few rebuilt. Only the Elves, protected by their Magic, remained intact after the war in the eastern highlands of Lurgan, their Kingdom thriving in a world caught between life and death.

The two crows gave cries and flew away, he watched them go a bit before taking a swig of his canteen and leaning back against the tree, his mind wandering to the task at hand.

Jair Wulnod and his gang opperated out of Gaptooth Bluff, using it as a base to launch raids into neighbouring settlements and farms, killing who stood in their way and taking what they pleased.

The regional governor in Van Horn was offering a bounty for Wulnod's head worth over five hundred silver pieces, enough pay to do anyone for four full months, something he couldn't pass up.

He put out his cigar and stood, fixing his overcoat, a black piece he nabbed off an old drunk he beat at cards one night

who didn't feel like coughing up cash. Well worn and showing its age, it still did its job and he liked how it looked on him.

Underneath he wore a buttoned grey shirt, an semi automatic pistol tucked inside the belt he wore with his blue denim pants. If one didn't know any better they'd think he was one of the cowboys or farmhands, the only give away he was something else entirely was the Desert Eagle rifle, a brown automatic gun strapped to his back.

Turning from the tree he picked up the reins of his chestnut coloured horse, Freya, and swung up into the saddle, giving her a few long pats on the side of the neck before easing her onto the road.

It was late afternoon, heat mild (thankfully) and he didn't expect to see many faces along the road, most keeping to their homes unless they needed to conduct urgent business somewhere. If all went well, and Wulnod and his boys didn't give him too much trouble, he hoped to be drinking some chocolate milk at Reena's Saloon in Van Horn tonight, relaxing after an honest day's work.

As he traveled the road he took the time to study the abandoned houses and farmsteads that lined it or sat situated in fields on either side. Most lost their occupants decades ago as nomad raiding parties and packs of Direwolves increased in the area.

Direwolves, once only a threat to severely isolated homesteads back in prewar days, grew to become a serious threat, hunting in packs up to one hundred strong, attacking and killing animals and people alike without warning.

No pack had been seen in the region for a year and he hoped it stayed that way. His Desert Eagle might be powerful but against one hundred fangs and claws he'd be dead in minutes.

Gaptooth bluff, a large cliff overlooking a drop off into the Keroac river, was where Wulnod built his 'fort', which had wooden walls and a dozen cabins inside. A strange place for Outlaws to live, particularly if you considered, as he did, how other gangs took control of old government buildings or outposts out in the western badlands, and rode into the more civilized areas to raid and pillage.

But Jair Wulnod was not the type to complicate matters. He was a simple man, so he took up residence in the very region he robbed, a very brave or very stupid decision on his part.

The road led straight for an hour, nothing of interest happening to the hunter, then it split in two, one leading to Van Horn, the other to Gaptooth bluff, and so he went right towards the bluff.

By now he'd been a bounty hunter for well over five years, his nerves and manner long ago accustomed to the life of a killer

for he didn't take live prisoners, too much work in that and, he reasoned, most of the people he went after didn't deserve to draw breath in the first place.

Wulnod killed three babies in his last raid on a settlement to the south of the capital called Lendale, before slaughtering half the town. The woman before Wulnod he hunted, Belle Nasta, murdered four men for their money after dates she set up with them, and when he finally found her hold up in a moldy hotel outside Lurgan's second largest city, Abiliene, he didn't even let her get a word out before pulling the trigger and filling her body with dozens of rounds.

To him such murderers deserved no less, but unlike others in his profession he didn't take joy in it, but instead saw it as a duty to rid society, already on the edge of chaos, of horrid elements.

He took pride in what he did, but enjoyment? No. His only enjoyment came from drinking his glasses of chocolate milk at Reena's every time a job was complete, the sweet taste his favorite in the world.

By the third hour mark he came upon Wulnod's fort, the wooden walls manned by four scuffy looking men who peered down at him with suspicion.

"What you want?"

One asked, his rifle waving in the air as he spoke.

"Is Jair in?"

The bounty hunter asked politely, unwilling to give away his purpose.

Gaptooth bluff was, surprisingly, a green place. Scrubs and healthy grass grew around the cliff and the fort. A stark contrast from other places even five miles back, which was brown in colour, with little grass or shrubbery of any kind.

"You got business here mister?"

"I come to see about an arrangement he and me made a week back down by the Crooked Water."

"Your name?"

"Ezra Beck."

The rifle waving henchman, a rail thin man with a lazy eye and buck teeth, jumped off the ramparts and went in search of his boss.

Ezra scratched his stomach and eased his hand next to his pistol, all without being seen. Once Jair showed himself he'd blast him.

Minutes later a balding, yellowed whiskered man came up onto the ramparts, his scowl clear as day. Obviously he knew

Ezra was bullshitting, but for some reason didn't tell his man that at the start.

His last mistake.

"Who the hell are you?"

Wulnod demanded, pointing a red finger down at him, snarling the words like he was putting on a show of how tough he was for his men.

"Jair Wulnod, I've come to deliver Justice for those children."

Ezra pulled the pistol and in four rapid shots cut down the leader and his henchmen close to him. Now the hard part began, getting close enough to grab the body and ride back to Van Horn.

Holstering the pistol the bounty hunter armed himself with his rilfe as the fort gates flung open, six Wulnod gang members charging out.

In a hail of bullets he shot them down.

Getting down off Freya to protect her from any enemy fire Ezra continued into the fort on foot, keeping a sharp eye out for gang members.

It didn't take long for some to appear, popping out behind crates in the middle of the fort ground, old food containers by the looks of them.

Hittng the ground Beck let the first volley whizz by his head and then snapped up, releasing a barrage of his own, the RAT TAT TAT TAT of his rifle echoing across the grounds, dropping each of his targets.

Running to the stairs Ezra dodged more bullets and made it to the ramparts where he snatched Wulnod's body, threw it over the wall and leapt down after it, stowing it on Freya and riding off down the road, leaving the remainder of the gang to lick their wounds and question their future.

Dumping Wulnod's body inside a jail cell in Van Horn's sheriff's office Ezra said his goodbyes to the lawmen, accepted his payment, and stepped out into Van Horn's streets.

A quiet town most days, Van Horn had been built shortly after the war between the nations, a refuge for those who survived the bombings.

Reena Delgado, the owner of the sole saloon, was a descendant of Maxwell Delgado, Van Horn's first pioneer and regional governor. Three other ancestors of her held the office but by her birth her family faded from town politics and took up the work of saloon keeping. Her grandfather, Joseph, building the establishment with his family's riches.

Leading Freya down the dusty street Ezra past a few faces he

knew, ranch hands come in from the surrounding area to binge drink and party on their off hours. He nodded to them, said hello to one, and kept on going, not in the mood for chit chat.

He smirked, when was he ever in the mood for idle talk? If he had something to say or knew the person well, he was ready and willing to speak. But, if he didn't know the person well or at all, he found no use in discussing mundane and pointless subjects both he and his conversation partner would forget two minutes after walking away.

Reaching the saloon, a red wood building at the center of town, drunks in dirty overalls already cluttering its main steps and 'front porch' as Reena called the large platform they stood on.

One drunk he knew on the steps, Alred MacIver, waved at him excitedly, his brown bearded face red with drink, eyes wild and happy.

"Hey! Heeeeey! Its Ezra."

Alred laughed, turning into hiccups.

"How you doin' friend? Been a long time since I saw you 'round here. How you keepin'?"

Ezra put a boot on the step and leaned over his leg with a smile. Despite MacIver's near daily drunkenness and his own

usual aversion to drunks, he liked the man and didn't mind sparing him a few minutes out of his day when he saw him.

"Grabbed a bounty back at Gaptooth bluff,"

Ezra said jerking a thumb back towards his horse,

"Jair Wulnod. Besides that I've been in the east lately huntin' down bounties there."

"You sure get around Ezra."

The older man giggled and patted his knee.

"You goin' to have a drink?"

"Yup."

"Mind bringin' me outta whisky? Reena said I had my fill but...."

He laughed again,

"I wanna have one more swig. Just one more."

Ezra rubbed his chin and looked through the batwing doors of the saloon. When Reena said something she stuck to it, it wouldn't be easy to convince her.

"Well Al. You know how Reena can be. Don't hold your breath but I'll see what I can do."

"Oh thank you! Thank you!"

Alred nearly fell face first into the dirt he was so happy and moving in excitement for another taste of alcohol. Ezra chuckled, clapped him on the shoulder and headed inside.

The pianist played an old love song as he walked in, one he heard many times before but could never remember the name. The smell of beer, cigarette and cigar smoke, and some body odour, made Ezra crinkle his nose.

Reena's saloon was home, or the closest thing to a home he had in several years, a place where he was always welcome whether or not he had cash on him. Reena offered bed and board to anyone who needed it in a pinch, all to be paid back later when the person could afford to do so.

He kept room 9 specially reserved for himself, had ever since he came to Van Horn when he took up bounty hunting, and he looked forward to laying his head down on his soft pillow tonight as he walked towards the bar where Reena waited on a woman.

With black hair cut short into an almost bowl cut style, olive skin and big brown eyes always seeming to smile, and a pretty face, Reena was popular with Van Horn's single, and married, men. She humoured those who spoke with respect and didn't cross the line, but those who did met with a stern retort at best and at worst received a ban for life, followed by Ezra or another friend throwing the man out.

When he plopped down at his usual stool Reena gave him a wink and said she'd be right there.

She handed the woman, a drifter by the looks of her, duster jacket and silver semi automatic pistol at her waist, a bottle of whisky and then moved down to him, taking his hands in hers.

"How did the hunt go?"

"Jari Wulnod's dead and I collected. So, miss Delgado if you please, bring me some chocolate milk."

Reena grinned and went into the store room, coming back with a carton of milk and a tall glass. Setting it down and pouring Ezra his drink.

"Enjoy. Its nice to have you back."

"How was it while I was away?"

"Same old same really. Ricky Haines tried gettin' freaky on me a few nights back but Bud Simmons took care of that. Ricky still can't feel his left arm."

"Rick? Never figured he was the type. Bet Hannah let him have it when he got home."

Reena nodded to the affirmative.

"Hell has no fury like a woman who's the receivin' end of infidelity. She tore him apart with a good tongue lashin'.

Dunno if he feels more pain from what Bud did to him or Hannah's strong whip."

"Either way he learned a lesson I suspect."

Reena went off to take care of other customers and Ezra enjoyed his beverage, sighing contently many times as he drank.

With Wulnod out of the way he'd rest for a few weeks before taking on another job. He thought about taking a few months off but knew he'd go insane if he just stayed in Van Horn all the time, as dangerous as the world was he wanted to be out in the wilds and experiencing it.

Nursing his drink Ezra stretched and looked around the saloon, his eyes casually running over every patron, some he knew, others he didn't and assumed were drifters or travelers passing through.

In the corner, away from everyone else, he saw an Elven man and a young child with him eating what appeared to be sandwiches of some kind.

Elves were rare in Athabaska, most preferring to stay in the highlands of Lurgan or if they needed to, the lowlands. Those who came into Athabaska either needed services unavailable in their homlands, were looking for someone.

Or running from the law.

Ezra studied the man. He wore a beige cloak, some kind of pendant keeping it together at his neck, it looked like a Dragon.

The Elf's hair was brown streaked with white, but he didn't believe this was due to age, the Elf coming across as young even for one of the Fair Folk, maybe a hundred or two hundred years old at most.

Which meant, most likely, the child with him wasn't his own as most Elves didn't have children until they reached the age of five hundred.

As a boy Elves fascinated him. He loved listening to stories about them, and always wished to meet one. Now of course, in his middle thirties, such fantasies had faded with age, but he still held onto the wonder and reverence he felt for them, knowing they respected the creation of the Gods and the Gods themselves far more than any other race.

More an intellectually religious person than one prone to do rituals and prayers, Ezra didn't fall into the typical religious category for most people and thus many assumed he was either an atheist or just didn't care one way or another, but the truth was he believed with all his being in the Gods and Goddesses of the Athabaskan and Lurgan pantheons, he just believed in his own way, free of organized religion's dogma and structure.

The child, a girl, shared nothing in common with the man she sat with besides her long pointed ears. Her hair, raven black, was tied in a braided ponytail, her eyes, sapphire blue, stared intently at the sandwich she ate almost as if she believed if she didn't it would disappear between her fingers.

He guessed she was between eleven or twelve years old, which in Elven terms was practically an infant given the longest lived Elves could reach up to seven thousand years and perhaps even older.

"Busy studyin' my customers?"

Reena teased coming back around to him, leaning against the barstand.

"Sure. Always interested in people."

"A paradox ain't it? You say how much you dislike people and then you enjoy studyin' 'em?"

"Humanity as a whole I do have a general dislike. But individiual people is always fun to watch and study. Fascinatin' creatures we are."

"You gonna go all philosopher on us here Ezra?"

He laughed and finished off his chocolate milk, gesturing for a refill.

"My 'philosophizing' isn't suited for this crowd. I'd be better

served by discussin' crops or raiders than the meaning of life or how the Gods interact with creation."

He glanced about at the other patrons, noting their dirty overalls, button down shirts, mud clad boots. Rough and worn all. Not stupid folks by any means, at least not in the main, but not people one would wish, or could, have deep conversations like that, so Ezra didn't even bother. He accepted them as is.

Reena was a bit different, having come from a more 'cultured' family if one wanted to use the term, though Ezra hated it and found it snobbish. She could discuss these topics but found herself drawn to the rougher sides of life while still retaining a touch of her upper class roots.

She poured him more milk and he downed it in one gulp, wiping his lips and sighing happily.

"You sure buy the good stuff."

He said.

"Thank Alon's Farm in Bendicut. They're the ones who produce it, I just buy it."

"Thank the Gods for both of ya!"

He held up the glass and tipped the side. He wanted one more glass. Reena rolled her eyes and took up the carton.

"Last one."

"OK, last one."

She poured and he knocked it back.

"Gotta take care of business."

Ezra got up and made his way to the saloon's bathroom, which led him across the path of the two Elves.

He was halfway past when the male Elf snatched his coat sleeve.

"Can we talk?"

His voice, soft, unthreatening, was distinct from any human Ezra ever heard speak. Almost musical.

"Why?"

"Its important."

"I don't even know you."

"I know, but I wouldn't ask if it wasn't urgent."

"Mister, you sure got a weird way of askin' to talk."

Ezra gently took his hand from his sleeve and headed into the bathroom, did his 'business' and came back out, sucking in a mouthful of air as he slid in beside the male Elf, hoping it wasn't a trap or something criminal the man wanted done.

"What is it you want?"

"Are you Ezra Beck?"

"Yes....Wait, you tellin' me you didn't know who I was before you got me to sit down?"

"I had a hunch."

He looked at the Elf for a moment.

"So, what do you want?"

"You're a bounty hunter right? You kill people?"

"I do."

"Would you take any job for the right price?"

"Buddy, what are you drivin' at? You keep talkin' and askin' but you ain't gettin' to the point."

The Elf looked around, obviously concerned someone might hear.

"I need you to guard this girl for me."

Ezra glanced at the girl who didn't meet his gaze, shy as could be. He looked back at the male Elf.

"Guard her? From what?"

"Not important. Will---"

"Listen friend,"

Ezra edged closer to him, his face getting close to his,

"I'm not usually a man to lose his temper but I don't work on no details, do you understand? You want me to protect this girl, fine, but why?"

"Men want her. Bad men, sir. If they get her they'll sell her into the Black Market."

Ezra's stomach churned at that, his mind conjuring up all sorts of unpleasant and horrible images. He heard of the Lurgan Black Market, a underworld of murder, slavery, and child exploitation.

"What's so special about this one?"

He asked, needing to know as it was unusual Black Market dealers went after average, run of the mill children.

"She has innate Magic."

And there it was.

All Elves could use Magic given enough training but it took decades to master effectively, but some, known as Adepts, could use Magic almost from birth without any effort on their part.

Adepts sold well on the Black Market, buyers using them for

any number of tasks but usually involving criminal activity such as robberies and assassinations. They burned them up fast, forcing them to use their Magic so much their internal batteries soon fried and they died. Once that happened their masters simply chucked their bodies into a shallow grave and went to buy another.

It was a cruel, unforgivable system and if he could Ezra would gladly hunt down and kill every buyer and seller for free.

"You say guard her, but for how long?"

"Until you pass the borderlands sir."

"Borderlands?"

The borderlands, a region between Athabaska and the Republic of Duronia, was a hostile and unforgiving place. Full of sandy hills, mountains, and with lizards and animals more than willing to attack and eat any unsuspecting person.

It was the closest thing to hell a living person could get, and it made Ezra's skin crawl just thinking about it.

"So you want me to escort this young girl to Duronia? Is that what you mean?"

"Yes sir."

The bounty hunter looked once more on the girl who again kept her head down.

"What's her name?"

"Verena."

"Verena....I'll do it on the condition that you have my money waiting for me here when I get back."

The man agreed.

"OK, come up to my room and we can discuss things in detail in privacy."

The male Elf was Verena's uncle, Torrin Valis, and those hunting them were, much to Ezra's disgust, the girl's own maternal relatives who, on hard times, thought selling an Adept would net them a nice bag of cash.

Verena's father and mother, unable to keep her safe in Lurgan, tasked Torrin to take her into Athabaska and seek out Ezra, his reputation for getting jobs done and being deadly with his firearms what made them settle on him rather than any Elven bounty hunter.

The two Elves sat on his bed while Ezra stood by the door smoking another cigar. His room, medium sized with a table, bed, and lamp, wasn't anything to write home about but for Ezra it did alright.

A minimalist in all things he didn't care for finery or 'making

things purty' as Reena joked sometimes. He did fancy well made clothes from time to time and daggers and knives with engraved hilts and polished blades, but these were rare treats.

"When was the last time you saw them?"

Ezra asked Torrin.

"In the highlands. They attempted to ambush me as I was leaving our village, but I shot two of them and managed to escape."

"If you're good with a gun why hire me?"

"I got lucky,"

Torrin admitted,

"I'm no shootist sir. My niece needs a professional."

"She's got one,"

Ezra nodded to him,

"I swear I'll protect her with everything I got. Tell me Torrin, what will you do once you leave here? And where do I take her in Duronia?"

"I'll head back to Lurgan and try to sabatoge their efforts, and there's a friend of the family in Nesfall who agreed to take her in, she'll meet you in the main square."

The bounty hunter looked the Elf over. He wasn't much of a fighter by the looks of it but familial love and loyalty could bring out an inner strength in a person they never knew they had.

Then again, maybe it was better if the man didn't try to get the girl to Duronia's capital himself.

"She should get some rest,"

Ezra gestured at Verena.

"It'll be a long journey and she gotta be rested. You can stay with her if you wish, I'll be downstairs tying up loose ends here till I get back."

"I'll stay with her."

"OK. I'll be at the bar if you need me. Goodnight Verena,"

Ezra smiled at the girl but she didn't respond.

He chuckled, kids never did seem to like him.

Chapter 2

The following morning Torrin said his final goodbyes to

Verena and shook Ezra's hand and shared a drink of chocolate milk with him Reena poured.

As the Elf headed for home Ezra watched him go on the steps of the saloon arms wrapped underneath a rail, Reena by his side.

"You sure about this?"

She asked.

"The girl needs a protector."

"And that needs to be you?"

"The parents requested my help and offered to pay. I'm not gonna turn down a paying gig."

Reena shook her head.

"This ain't about the money. I know you well enough to know that you fool. Money has never been one of your priorities. Justice and fairness is what you try to fight for."

Bringing his arms up Ezra folded them and scratched his chin.

"Your point?"

"You're doing this out of a sense of duty to help an innocent child. Its admirable, but ain't it a bit risky? These aren't some small time criminals on the run or slum gangs Ezra, these are slavers, Black Market men. Capable of a helluva lot more than

the average dumbass you hunt."

He shrugged.

"When have I ever quaked in my boots against superior odds?"

"Ezra!"

Reena dropped her teasing veener and took on a serious, almost angry, expression. Her finger whipped up into his face,

"Stop and think for a moment would you? You plan on taking on---"

The bounty hunter straightened up and walked inside the saloon, cutting off Reena's speech. She fumed, storming in after him.

He waved off another attempt at a lecture and went upstairs into his room where Verena sat on his bed, mind wandering someplace only she knew about.

Ezra stepped in carefully, not wanting to scare the girl, and he stood before the bed slipping his hands into his pants pockets.

"Your uncle's gone,"

He said,

"Its just us now. I promise to get you to Duronia safely young lady. You have my word."

She looked up at him. Her eyes, full and scared, showed her doubts in what he said. Ezra couldn't blame the kid. Dragged from the only home she ever knew, taken away from an established life to go on the run with a hired killer who looked as friendly as a sandstorm in boiling weather, it was no wonder why she looked at him as she did.

Still, if they were going to survive this Ezra needed Verena to trust him, even if she disliked him. Trust in his abilities and his promise to her and her uncle.

"I'm hungry."

She said softly.

"Now that is something I can fix right now."

Ezra grinned and gestured for her to follow.

Reena made them both scrambled eggs on Ezra's suggestion, saying it was her best dish and Verena wouldn't regret it if she tried it.

She wolfed it down.

There was no more arguments between Ezra and Reena, the latter accepting the bounty hunter's decision even if she thought it was foolish. For his part he believed he had the ability to see it through and he would make it.

Early riser patrons found their way into the saloon one by one until a dozen or so crowded around two tables asking for beer and meals.

"So your work begins."

Ezra said to Reena as she slid behind the counter to fetch a whisky bottle.

"No rest for the wicked."

She grinned and went off to serve her customers.

Returning his gaze to the child the bounty hunter thought of what to say. He wasn't good with kids, hadn't been throughout his life. He liked kids, but whereas some men had paternal instincts, as he heard it called, he never felt he did.

There was no great urge to protect women or children as a male like some men felt. He would certainly do it if he saw either one being harmed but because they were fellow people, living, breathing creatures that didn't deserve to feel unnecessary pain.

But he never held to the belief that as a man he was duty bound to give aid. Rather he thought it was a duty everyone, every adult, man or woman, should do, and didn't see the reason why it should fall squarely on the male half of the species when many women, as far as he was concerned, were just as capable of handling themselves as many men.

"When you're ready we sh----"

The explosion threw them out of their seats.

Ezra was thrown through the air into the shelves of alcohol behind the bar counter, bottles shattering, beer, ale, and whisky pouring over his back.

Gun fire erupted, the loud boom of shotgun blasts. Cries of wounded, shouts of orders being given.

Ezra's vision, blurry, slowly cleared. He stared at the brown wooden floor for a minute, struggling to center himself.

"Reena."

He coughed, voice hoarse.

"Reena...What's goin' on?"

When he received no reply he reached into his gun belt and pulled out his pistol and forced himself onto his feet, ignoring the throbbing pain in his forehead.

Much of the front of the saloon was gone, demolished by whatever kind of explosives the attackers used. Two patrons sitting close by the wall were nothing but charred pieces of meat.

Looking to his left Ezra spotted Verena, the Elven girl alive and unharmed but shaken up pretty bad, Reena standing over her

firing her white Magnum revolver. She glanced over,

"Gonna help or what?"

Nodding Ezra stumbled around the counter and over to what remained of the front of the saloon and took cover, feeling the bullets pounding against the outside walls.

"Give up the girl!"

A male voice demanded amid the chaos.

"Its her we want. We don't have quarrel with you humans."

"Yeah,"

Ezra grunted softly,

"Well, you do now you bastard."

Rising from position he looked out on Van Horn's dusty street and saw dozens of Elves clad in various different colours, rifles and pistols aimed at the place.

He pulled back the trigger and let loose his own hail of rounds, killing two closest to the saloon and nicking one in the arm, forcing him to run down the street for cover of his own.

Van Horn's militia, led by the governor, failed to show, leaving Ezra with a bad taste in his mouth. In the event of an attack the governor was supposed to mobilize and lead the town's men in its defense, but no one came to their aid.

Almost as if they had been paid off.

It wouldn't be that surprising. The governor had been caught dealing in bribes and 'hush' money before but due to political connections got off without punishment.

But this? Allowing an armed force into town without a fight?

It left Ezra's blood boiling.

Ducking down behind the saloon wall the bounty hunter fell back and ran up the stairs, kicking open his door and grabbing his Desert Eagle rifle. Going back down he unloaded on the Elves.

He sprayed them with rounds, most too confident in their strength in numbers to take his earlier attack seriously.

Now they paid for their hubris, cut down.

Ezra reloaded as he went out and continued his barrage on those that survived his intitial onslaught. They tried to hide behind the store opposite the saloon but the bounty hunter simply walked around it and filled the two Elves cowering there with holes in their torsos and heads.

When these were dead he swung back around to the street and came face to face with the man who ran down the street after he opened fire the first time, and saw he was just a kid, no more than fifteen or sixteen if he had to guess.

"Give up."

Ezra demanded gesturing with his rifle.

"You just killed yourself."

"Boy, don't flap your gums. Surrender."

"You think we'll be the last? Mister surely you aren't that stupid are you? We're but the first."

"Don't test my patience kid. Put. Your. Hands. Up."

Instead the Elf reached for his sidearm.

Ezra snapped back the trigger and put two rounds into the boy's forehead, blood popping out like a melon as he hit the dirt.

He cursed under his breath at what the kid made him do. The act was justified, self defense, but the guilt came anyway, taking so young a life.

Ezra checked in on Reena and Verena, both unharmed and safe. The patrons who survived the blast, the majority thank the Gods, hid at the back of the saloon during the fight, none armed as they believed they wouldn't need their weapons.

After this check up the bounty hunter strode for the governor's office up the street, gunning down the man's guards when they tried to intercept him.

They had seen the whole thing, but did nothing, giving him all the confirmation he needed to believe the corrupt son of the bitch was bought off.

Kicking in the door Ezra stormed in, killing those inside, the sounds of his rilfe resounding throughout town.

"MacCallister!"

He called for the governor, going from room to room kicking in doors and looking through closets and under furniture.

"MacCallister! Get your ass out here you coward! MacCallister!"

The governor stayed hidden and so forced Ezra to ransack the place bottom to top until finally finding the politician curled up in a ball in the upstairs bathroom covered by a bathtub curtain.

He dragged the man down the steps, making sure he hit his head on each one, and threw him outside on Van Horn's streets.

"You betrayed this town for the last time."

Ezra kicked the man square in the mouth, busting his lips and forcing out his two front teeth.

"Wai---AGH!"

Ezra beat the man down with punches and kicks, refusing to waste ammo on such a slimy creature.

MacCallister begged and pleaded with him to stop, to listen to reason, but Ezra ignored him.

"What reason? WHAT REASON?"

He stomped on MacCallister's leg, hearing the bones snap and then delivered a kick to his chest.

"You sold out your own town didn't you? DIDN'T YOU?"

"You only get one life,"

MacCallister said, coughing on his own blood,

"Why not take advantage of what you can? I needed money, Beck."

"You got blood on your hands, governor."

He withdrew his pistol from his holster,

"People you swore to serve and protect."

"Wait a minute, wait a minute!"

MacCallister scrambled to his feet holding his hands up frantically.

"I deserve a trial. I demand one."

"Why? You just admitted your guilt."

Ezra shot both hands.

Falling back clutching his bleeding hands together MacCallister let out a loud wail, a primal cry of a man on the verge of death.

Ezra circled around him until he was positioned directly above his head.

"NO, PLEASE!"

He fired directly into MacCallister's nose bridge, tearing his face apart in a mess of blood and flesh.

Once he finished he reloaded his rifle and slipped it back into its carrying sling, listening to the calm silence which had overtaken Van Horn again.

He stood over the governor's corpse a bit longer, collecting his thoughts and resigning himself to the difficult task ahead, then went back to the saloon.

Reena and the others, besides a good fright and some superficial burns, would survive just fine. Without a governor now Ezra nominated Reena to become the interim leader of Van Horn, basing his reasoning on her level headedness, fairness, and sense of Justice. And, frankly, he didn't trust any of the other well known figures in Van Horn or the

surrounding area to do a good job.

There was the MacVurish brothers, twins who ran a successful farm a mile outside of Van Horn who, like Reena, could claim descent from the first settlers, in their case Josiah MacVurish, a coal miner who worked in the nearby Thurso hills.

Clay, the eldest by two minutes, was a shrewd businessman and well respected for his moneymaking ability, but was an all around asshole. The youngest, John Ross, was a nice enough fellow on most days but he was easy to sway on any given issue, leaving him open to corruption.

Another successful business owner, Tobias Schrader, who owned the Thurso mines as had his family for over a hundred years, was no politician or leader and hardly came into town anyway, preferring to keep to himself up in the hills at the mining village named Laytonville.

Of the officers in the militia Ezra didn't trust them anymore than he did the late governor. None came to the town's defense during the Elf attack, they stayed indoors and if it was up to him they'd be just as dead as McCallister but executing a dozen men in the street wasn't going to fly so he didn't press the issue.

So, having no other candidates and trusting in Reena more than anyone else the bounty hunter nominated her and the

townsfolk accepted, naming Reena Delgado Mayor and giving her a term of three months, the estimated time it would take to rebuild the saloon and have a new governor sent down.

Once everything in Van Horn was settled Ezra gathered enough food and water for the journey to the Republic and placed Verena on Freya and mounted himself. With a nod to Reena and a few other residents the bounty hunter rode off, not knowing when or if he'd be back.

Chapter 3

Two days out of leaving Van Horn Ezra and Verena reached the border that separated the borderlands from Athabaska proper, and the contrast between the two was immediately obvious.

While Athabaska was no paradise, it had grass, shrubbery, many healthy trees, and lakes, rivers and streams.

As they reached the mountainous border with what many called the badlands or Deathlands, these things fell away, replaced by black or red rock, sand, and dead plants, tree husks, and skeletons.

Verena's head rested on Ezra's back, the Elven girl fast asleep, the rocking and swaying of the saddle putting her under fast.

It was just as well, Ezra thought, the two not exactly having much to talk about beyond the basics of 'Are you hungry?' or 'Do you need to use the bathroom?'

He tried asking her about Lurgan, her life before all this madness began, but Verena shook her head and refused to answer.

Taking what passed for the main path into the Borderlands called the Miner's Cut, so named for a company of miners a hundred years ago who were sent up into the mountains to mine for gold.

All died, either from wild animal attacks or starvation once their food ran out and three week long sandstorm, some say conjured by Magic, blocked their path back down.

While riding the Miner's Cut Ezra kept his pistol out, aware of rumours of Direwolves in the area from Duronian merchants brave enough to travel through it to reach Van Horn.

The path wound up into the mountain and then dipped down again, leading into what many termed the Lowland Sands, a vast desert of yellow sand and black and red rock. Hot and almost devoid of life.

On either side walls of reddish black rock blocked out much of

the sun, red vein like lines running through them. If he needed too it would've been difficult for Ezra to turn about and retreat the way he had come.

He prayed to the nature spirits to keep the animals at bay long enough for them to get down safely.

Luckily the spirits heard his prayers and kept the Direwolves at bay, allowing the bounty hunter and his Elven charge to make it down into the Lowland Sands without issue.

As Freya's hooves touched and sunk into the sands she whinnied, Ezra patting the side of her neck and whispering into her ear to calm her. The heat was sweltering, enough to make anyone want to fall back and retreat to cooler locations.

It only took a few minutes before sweat started forming on his face and under his armpits, leaving him feeling clammy.

Stirred awake by the sudden shift in temperature Verena rubbed her eyes and looked around.

"We're in the Borderlands?"

She asked, Ezra noticing the fear in which she spoke.

"Yes. Try to go back to sleep, I'll wake you when its time to camp."

"Camp?"

He nodded, glancing off into the distance, thinking he saw a black shape move.

"We'll need to sleep a night here at least. The sands are dangerous at night."

"They aren't dangerous now?"

"They are,"

He said moving Freya forward,

"But at night bigger and nastier creatures come out. They stalk the sands, attacking anythin' that moves. Its better to be silent and unmovin' than tryin' to outrun 'em. We'd be grub before we knew it."

This made the girl go rigid with fright, and Ezra, never much good at comforting people, didn't bother trying now, just kept Freya going.

The Lowland Sands, miles of yellow in every direction, was a bleak landscape which could make the happiest man despair. Ezra fought against the urge to drink more and more water from their canteens, knowing he needed to save every drop.

Verena, to her credit, did too. Despite her age she was a tough cookie. He hoped once in the Republic she'd be free to live her life the way she wanted, without fear of being harassed or captured.

The slave trade was outlawed in Duronia and Athabaska, done away with during the years after the Athabaskan-Lurgan war, but Lurgan held on to the abhorrent practice, freedom only for those who had money, were lucky enough to be born into a free family, or who successfully escaped.

Passing over numerous sand dunes, faces covered in sweat, the two carried on without complaint until the sun went down. When it did Ezra built them a small campsite but without the fire.

"Why no fire?"

Verena asked him stretched out on a blanket.

"Fires give off smoke. Smoke swirls up into the air, which in turn, young lady, tells unwanted guests where to find us."

"And why couldn't you just say that?"

For the first time Ezra noticed a hint of a smile on her face, making him grin.

"Glad to see you have a sense of humour."

He grabbed some bread, ham, and cheese and split it between him and Verena, eating in silence as he listened to the landscape around them.

Night Stalkers, a type of giant lizard resembling a salamander, black as night save for their bright red eyes, scrawled along

the sands searching for prey. If one found their camp Ezra doubted he'd hear it, the creatures able to be as quiet as a church mouse.

On his lap he placed his pistol. Verena looked at it a few times but did not comment, continuing to eat.

A few hours past and she fell asleep, the bounty hunter staying up late into the night, walking around the campsite and keeping watch until the sun came up, then, with a sigh, fell into a fitful sleep.

He slept five hours, enough to keep him going for awhile if not truly refreshing. Verena, in contrast, was refreshed and energized, a good change to her prior quiet and aloof attitude.

They ate a cold, quick breakfast before mounting up and continuing their journey, spending another day in the sweltering sun taking cautious sips of their water and liberally dabbing at their faces.

When night fell again Ezra cooked soup and shared it with Verena, this time the two having a conversation about Lurgan.

She'd miss it, she told him, especially her friends and cousins, but she understood why she needed to leave. Despite what one would think considering her age, Verena was far more mature than many adults Ezra knew. She had a good head on her shoulders.

The conversation turned to him after awhile, the Elven girl asking how he came to the bounty hunter's life.

"Kinda fell into it."

Ezra said rubbing his hands together for warmth.

"I tried farmin'. Didn't take. Took up ranchin'. Didn't take. Finally I decided to try travelin' merchant. Didn't take. Desperate for money I picked up a bounty poster one day in Van Horn and it set me on my current road."

"Who was the first person you hunted?"

"An old bandit named Alfred Jennings. The man was nearing seventy and had been robbin' the folk of Athabaska since he was thirty. I tracked him to a cabin in the Lake Vescola district, close to the Lurgan border, and stabbed him to death."

"Did you feel guilty afterwards?"

"Guilty? I felt bad in endin' a life but Jennings chose to live how he did. He made the choices that eventually led to his death, I was merely an instrument. If not me someone else woulda done it."

Verena said nothing to this, though Ezra sensed she didn't believe it. If this was true, it wasn't the first time he came across someone who believed killing was wrong, no matter the reason.

He respected that stance, but rejected it as foolish. Sometimes people forfeited their rights to life. Serial killers, child murderers and rapists, animal abusers, these people had no rights in Ezra's eyes, they gave them up the moment they chose to brutalize other people or other living creatures.

After their dinner Verena retired to her bed while Ezra took up guard duty, patrolling the outskirts of the campsite, Desert Eagle rifle in hand.

In the distance, out in the sands, he heard the cries of predators and prey. Shifting feet, yelps, growls of a last stand, and finally the final scream as whatever it was met its death.

He didn't allow his imagination to fill in the gaps.

The killing kept the bounty hunter awake throughout the night, he stayed vigilant and refused to lay down, fearing Night Stalkers were about.

Luckily none appeared and the duo moved on, making it across into Duronia on the third day.

Greener than Athabaska, Duronia was best described as an open plain for the most part, the land flat and grassy for much of it.

There were trees and a few forests, particularly in the

Northern half of the country, called the Old Dominion by those in the West due to many of their ancestors coming from there a century ago.

Happy to finally get out of the Lowland Sands Ezra allowed himself to enjoy the ride in the open air, taking a big gulp of it down.

Crisp and fresh, the sort of Magic one didn't need to go find a Mage to be able to experience. The Gods provided it free of charge for all living things.

Nesfall was a day's ride from the borderlands and Ezra made good time, keeping Freya on a steady pace. When they stopped for the night, feeling confidence no one was following them, the bounty hunter set a fire and cooked some venison Reena gave him for their journey.

Verena ate it hungrily.

As the girl slept he sat by the fire and kept watch, his rifle by his side in case any animal or person came upon them and had ill intent.

His thoughts drifted to Reena and Van Horn, wondering how she was getting on with the business of governance.

Knowing her she was probably devising ways to make him help her once he returned, which he would reluctantly do, refusing her was futile.

"Took a bit of extra work to find you mister."

Ezra tensed, the words coming from behind him, but he never heard anyone ride up.

"Suppose it did,"

He said relaxed, pointing to a canteen,

"Needa drink?"

"I'm fine thank you."

"Mind tellin' me your name, friend?"

"My name? Ain't important. Now my boss, Asdren Korlock? His name is. You took his property."

"His property? Now I don't recall doin' no such thing."

He heard a rifle cock.

Knew it was trained on his head.

One slip up and he was gone.

"The girl, mister. She belongs to Mr. Korlock."

"Now when did people belong to anyone?"

"Give me the girl."

Ezra slowly raised his hands and stood.

"I'm gonna turn round now. Don't shoot."

"Just give me the girl!"

Ezra dived left, catching the shooter off guard, his aim off as he fired two shots, allowing the bounty hunter to pull his pistol and spin around to see his face.

A young man, a bit older than Verena he'd guess, peach fuzz on his upper lip.

A damn boy. They sent a boy?

"Kid, drop it!"

He yelled the command and rose to his feet, striding forward to where the boy stood.

"Stay back---I'll shoot you goddammit!"

"No you won't."

"I WILL!"

Shots rang out, an Elven man materializing out of nowhere on Ezra's right flank, a bullet catching him in his shoulder blade.

He dropped, half stunned, half in pain.

A slave and his handler.

He should've known better than to suspect they'd just send a boy to handle a job only an adult could see through. Idiot.

"Good work Reed."

The boy chuckled,

"Got that fucker good."

"Mr. Korlock taught me well. Get the girl, I'll finish the human."

The boy went to where Verena sat on the ground sobbing, awoken by the loud yells and gunshots, while the Mage came leisurely over to Ezra, obviously believing the hard part was finished.

But Ezra still had his pistol in his hand, when he fell his hand went underneath his stomach blocking the Mage's view of it, and the cocky fool wasn't even thinking about this possibility.

The bounty hunter ignored the burning pain down his shoulder and rolled over, pistol raised at the Mage, the man's jaw dropping in disbelief.

"SHI--"

His words cut short, both his eyes exploding.

Rising to his feet Ezra charged the boy, tackling him to the ground just as he reached Verena and ferociously whipped him upside the head.

"Stop! Stop!"

Ezra felt a pull on his coat sleeve.

"What're you doin'? "

He asked the girl,

"These men are here to take you back to Lurgan."

"I know but....enough. He's had enough."

Ezra looked down at the boy underneath him, the left side of his head bloodied, hair matted, and his cheek and eye were beginning to swell up.

"Let him go."

"He knew what he did was wrong."

Ezra said over his shoulder.

"He's old enough to know slavin' is wrong. He chose to live this life, and sometimes life has consequences. I gave him a chance to surrender."

"Ezra....please."

The bounty hunter placed his pistol to the boy's forehead, blocking out all of Verena's pleas.

Suddenly she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him off, both crashing to the ground.

Faster, Ezra was on his feet again in seconds, hauling the girl up by her shirt, demanding an answer to the display of stupidity he just witnessed.

"He's still a kid like me!"

She screamed into his face.

Behind them the boy moaned, trying to speak but the words not forming into anything coherent.

Ezra put Verena down and holstered his pistol. He stared down at the Elven kid deciding what to do with him.

"You know,"

He said bending down and picking the boy up,

"You'd be dead by now if it wasn't for this girl, so better not mess this up or I swear I'll slit your throat and bury you myself."

He placed him on the back of Freya and then he and Verena mounted, riding for Nessfall. They arrived three hours later, the city watch checking them over before permitting them inside.

Ezra passed the boy along to the watchmen, instructing them he tried stealing their guns while they slept so he needed to teach him a lesson.

They vowed to get him to a doctor and then thrown into a cell, which was enough to satisfy the bounty hunter. Theft, while not a minor crime by any means in Duronia, was nothing they'd hang him over.

At most the boy would receive a month in prison, more than enough time for Verena and her guardians to leave and disappear, and, he hoped, for the boy himself to reconsider his life.

Heading into the city proper Ezra struggled to navigate its busy streets and nearly lost his patience in doing so, only being saved from an outburst by Verena who knew the way, guiding him.

The family friend, an elderly woman who looked like she'd seen enough lifetime experience for three people, met them at the main square like Torrin promised, Verena spotting her close to a large Dragon shaped water fountain, studying the water.

"Shayna!"

Verena jumped down off Freya and embraced the woman in a hug. Ezra remained on his horse, happy to see the job done and the girl safe.

"Thank you for bringing her here,"

The elderly woman said looking over the girl's shoulder,

"You're a good man."

"Thank you ma'am. I trust you'll be fine now?"

"Yes. We'll be leaving for my home tomorrow. Would you join

us for dinner sir?"

He thought on it, imagining a good meal would go a long way in keeping his strength up for the journey home, but he shook his head all the same.

"Thank you ma'am, I appreciate the offer. Maybe another time I'll take you up on it but I better be headin' back. A friend of mine is waitin' on me."

Shayna understood and wished him well. Ezra said his goodbyes to Verena, took up Freya's reins and swung her around, his mind turning to Van Horn again, to the saloon....

And his chocolate milk.